

St. George's Episcopal Church  
Third Avenue and East 16th Street  
(Stuyvesant Square)  
New York  
New York County  
New York

HABS No. NY-5720

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ST. GEORGE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

HABS No. NY-5720

Location: Third Avenue and East 16th Street (Stuyvesant Square),  
New York, New York County, New York

Universal Transverse Mercator coordinates:  
18.586660.4509540

Present Owner  
and Occupant: Corporation of the Church Parish of Calvary Holy  
Communion of St. George's

Present Use: church

Significance: St. George's Episcopal Church derives its primary  
significance from its association with Harry Thacker  
Burleigh, internationally known black composer,  
arranger, and performer of music, who held the  
position as soloist at the church for more than 40  
years. Burleigh is extended much credit for bringing  
black spirituals to the attention of the public and  
other performers, and making them acceptable to be  
performed in serious settings. The church itself is a  
handsome example of Romanesque architecture.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of construction: 1846-1856
2. Architect: Blesch and Edlitz
3. Alterations and additions: The church was damaged by fire in  
1865 and rebuilt according to its original plan. It reopened in  
1867. The original stone spires were declared unsafe in 1888  
and removed the following year. In 1964 parts of the exterior  
and all of the interior surfaces were renovated and restored.

B. Historical Context: Although records of his early life are scarce,  
it is known that Harry Thacker Burleigh was born on December 2, 1866  
in Erie, Pennsylvania, and that his development in his younger years  
was greatly influenced by his grandfather and his mother. His  
grandfather, Hamilton Waters, was born a slave in Somerset County,  
Maryland. When eyesight problems and age rendered him less useful to  
his owner, he was set free. He headed north, intending to resettle  
in Canada, but ended up in Erie, Pennsylvania.

As a child, Harry was assigned to accompany his grandfather on the latter's rounds as a lamplighter. On these trips, Waters taught spirituals that he remembered from his plantation days to his grandson. These were later reinforced by Burleigh's mother who also sang them to him as he helped her with janitorial duties at the school where she was employed. Mrs. Burleigh's second job as a part-time maid for Mrs. Elizabeth Russell also provided a good, albeit unexpected, opportunity for Burleigh to be exposed to music. Russell was in the habit of inviting prominent musicians of the day to entertain her friends in her home. Harry frequently listened to these performances from outside the Russell residence. When Russell discovered his habit, he was asked to work inside during the concerts and thus was able to hear the performance much better.

Burleigh's fine singing voice was noticeable early in his life. In addition to attending school and working at a variety of non-musical part-time jobs, he performed in choirs and as a soloist at various churches and synagogues in Erie. Upon graduation from high school, Burleigh learned stenography in order to help support himself and his family, treating singing only as an avocation. At the age of 26 however, Burleigh learned of a competition for a tuition-free four year scholarship offered by the National Conservatory of Music in New York, and he decided to apply.

This institution, founded by Jeannette Thurber in 1885, had a brilliant faculty and a comprehensive curriculum whereby students could obtain every type of musical training. Borrowing \$25.00, Burleigh departed for New York in January 20, 1892 to sing before the Conservatory's committee of judges, who apparently had some initial reservations regarding his performance. In the meantime, Burleigh sought out the school's registrar to present a letter of introduction he had from Russell. The registrar, Frances Knapp McDowell, turned out to be a former guest of Russell who remembered Harry and intervened with the judges on his behalf. After a second audition, the judges were convinced that Harry should receive the scholarship.

Burleigh studied voice with Christian Fritsch, harmony with Ruben Goldmark, and counterpoint with John White and Max Speer. He played double bass and later the timpani in the school's orchestra, and worked in the registrar's office. At this time, Anton Dvorak was head of the conservatory and he was particularly drawn to Burleigh's renditions of spirituals. Dvorak was extremely impressed by the music and was instrumental in furthering Burleigh's emerging conviction that spirituals were not just for blacks. Dvorak paid Burleigh a very high compliment in including black folk themes in the "New World Symphony." In Burleigh's student days, he also sang in the choir of St. Philip's Colored Episcopal Church.

ST. GEORGE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
HABS No. NY-5720 (Page 3)

In 1894, Burleigh learned of an opening for a baritone soloist at St. George's Protestant Episcopal Church, one of the city's most wealthy and prestigious religious institutions. Among the 60 applicants for the position, Burleigh was the lone black. Some controversy reigned over Burleigh's application but he was eventually selected for the position, with senior church warden J.P. Morgan, Sr., casting the deciding vote. Burleigh sang at St. George's for 52 years.

The exposure gained as a soloist at St. George's led to a 25-year position at New York's Temple Emanu-El and to a busy career on the concert stage. To prepare himself, Harry mastered not only Hebrew but also Italian, French, and German. What at first distinguished his recitals from his contemporaries' was a decision to include a selection of "plantation songs" in his programs. Encouraged in this direction by George W. Kemmer, St. George's choir director and organist, Burleigh began arranging for choirs and solo voice the songs he had first heard his grandfather sing. This activity became the basis for a second career, one which further secured his lasting place in the history of American music.

Though Burleigh's best known works were his arrangements of spirituals, he was also very active as a composer of ballads and art songs. His approach to these genres was extremely pragmatic in that he realized that publishers were much more likely to purchase a song than, for example, a piece of chamber music. Thus, he concentrated on songs. Two ballads which became popular were "Jean" (1903) and "Little Mother of Mine" (1912).

Burleigh's art songs were not as popular or widely known as his ballads but further demonstrated his musical skills. Often set to poems by Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, they reveal Burleigh's ability to understand the essence of the text and to blend it with his musical setting. Outstanding examples include "The Young Warrior" (1914), "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" (1915), and "Lovely Dark and Lonely One" (1935).

Still, Burleigh was primarily known for his arrangements of spirituals, of which "Deep River" is today his best known, though he was not the first black to take an interest in promoting them. In the 1870s, for example, the Fisk University Jubilee Singers made plantation music known throughout the world. Burleigh skillfully capitalized on the tradition, not only performing the songs himself, but also interesting white performers in them. White baritone Oscar Seagle, who first brought spirituals to the attention of a large metropolitan audience, initiated the custom among white concert artists of the period of including a selection of spirituals in vocal recitals.

In many ways, however, Burleigh's chief professional connection remained with St. George's. The musical director and choir supported him in his efforts by performing a vesper service of spirituals every year. Other traditions included Burleigh's singing Faure's "The Palms" as an anthem for 52 consecutive years. When Burleigh retired from St. George's at the age of 80 in 1946, his name was carved upon a buttress in the choir room.

After retirement, Burleigh continued composing for a time until illness intervened. He died in September of 1949, leaving behind an indelible mark on American musical history.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Since St. George's is placed on an open square, the massive Romanesque church is a rare example of a New York City building that can be viewed uninterruptedly on two sides. The impressive structure conveys a feeling of solidity and permanence.
2. Condition of fabric: The church is maintained in very good condition.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Walls: smooth brownstone
2. Openings:
  - a. Doors: The three entrances are arched with an arcade above.
  - b. Windows: A fine rose window dominates the main gable.

- C. Site: St. George's was built on land donated by Peter Stuyvesant and is adjacent to the park which was named for him. The church complex consists of the main building, a chapel, and a parsonage. The church sits on the northern side of East 16th Street between Rutherford Placed and Third Avenue, facing onto the square.

## PART III. SOURCE OF INFORMATION

St. George's Episcopal Church (Harry T. Burleigh), National Historic Landmark nomination form, 1976.

Prepared and transmitted by: Holly K. Chamberlain, Historian  
HABS  
July 20, 1987

ADDENDUM TO  
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Third Avenue and East Sixteenth Street,  
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